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PANKAJ NANGIA/TODAY

NEELAM'S FIEFDOM: (Clockwise from left) Neelambai street dancing; her associates and adopted children in one of her opulent rooms; the temple she built; with Swaraj



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SIPRA DAS

# NEELAM Inc.

The death of Delhi's eunuch queen gives a glimpse of the power and money at her command

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

**D**ON'T SHOOT ANYTHING until I permit you, otherwise my curse will not spare you," said Neelam Hijra Bai to a television crew that was making a documentary on her life. The sting in her voice echoed in the hall filled with hundreds of gaudily dressed eunuchs from all over India. On Neelam's invitation, they had all come to attend the inauguration of a Sai Baba temple built by her in west Delhi. This was in September 2000 when she was the undisputed eunuch queen of Delhi. Neelambai had it all. A lavish lifestyle, power, admiration, political friends, stupendous earnings and a staunch eunuch following. To add to that, she had a raw, in-your-face sex appeal, rare among eunuchs. Taste, she

did not possess, but a whacky flamboyance possessed her. She got the most money, the best connections and the best men. Getting drunk on this heady cocktail cost her her life.

Last week, 38-year-old Neelambai fell prey to the curse of a eunuch from another gang. She was shot dead at point blank range in one of the busy corridors of Delhi's Tis Hazari courts. This happened just after she left court room No. 119, where she had deposed as a witness in the murder case of her associate Zarina. In October 2002, Zarina had been mistakenly murdered instead of Neelam.

"A bitter enmity over territory and earnings has taken my Neelam away from me," laments Gopal, her longtime companion, as he sits among the hijras mourning her death. A thick gold chain peeps out of his shirt, his fingers are

squashed by expensive rings. Two mobile phones lie in obeisance at his feet. The atmosphere is sombre, but prickly with insinuations, arguments, disagreements. "Let us see where this battle for blood takes us," says Gopal when asked about the gang war. "No, we don't want any revenge," yells Gudu Haji, an old eunuch in white who was Neelambai's guru.

Neelambai herself was "mummy" or "guru" to at least 60-odd eunuchs. "My mummy was killed because she was famous, had powerful friends, a huge property and a kind heart," says 22-year-old Sonia. Now widely regarded as her successor in terms of looks, hedonism and talent, Sonia belts out orders, drops names and "talks" to the press. "Don't confuse them with too many facts," she tells the others. "These press people don't have sharp brains like us," she adds while

clutching Mohini, the youngest of Neelambai's adopted children. "We do earn lakhs of rupees," she says and breaks off to attend to a call on her sleek Nokia mobile. Neelambai may be dead but her reflected glory is alive and kicking in these mirror images of her. Sonia speaks fluent English, making sure that it is noticed. "People are kind. Some worship us and even give us fridges, colour TVs, silk saris and cash," she says as if by rote.

Neelambai's murder has uncovered the treasure island she ruled over. She is said to have made a roaring business out of extortion and prostitution. Unlike other gangs, she didn't allow men to invade her group and rule. "Hijra kamayega, hijra khayega (Eunuchs will earn and eunuchs will eat)", was her line. Her main earnings came from the money she and her gang got out of goading, coaxing, begging or threatening people at weddings and births in her "territory". Her turf was bigger and greener than that of Geeta Haji's, who is now in jail for her alleged involvement in the murder of Zarina. "Gang wars over territory were very frequent," says Satish Golchha, assistant commissioner of police, west Delhi.

Neelambai's daily earnings were known to be between Rs 50,000 and Rs 1 lakh, which included a 10 per cent cut from the earnings of her followers. "I make enough money to buy what I desire," she had once said, throwing up her bejewelled arms. She often went abroad, travelled business class and loved designer perfumes. She had a chauffeur-driven Scorpio and an armed bodyguard. Reports say she had breast implants done in Singapore that cost her around Rs 15 lakh. Her luxurious albeit flashy two-

HEIR APPARENT: Sonia (centre) is likely to inherit Neelambai's legacy and her influence

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storey house with its high, multi-coloured ceiling is cluttered with wall hangings and photographs. Taken during her many trips abroad, some with Gopal and Mohini, the stills have Neelam in various poses, ensembles and jewellery. She reportedly donated a crown weighing 1.25 kg to the Sai Baba temple. She had a fetish for gold and was known to have possessed 4 kg of gold. Investigations following her death suggests that Neelambai was worth a few crores.

Gone are the days when eunuchs earned a few hundred rupees at traditional ceremonies or wore old saris. Now their blessings for happily-ever-after futures come for several thousand rupees. They gatecrash into wedding venues, tossing their tinted manes, wearing kurtis, silk pants and stilettos.

**C**UT back to September 2000 when Neelambai was to instal a Sai Baba idol in her temple. Sushma Swaraj, then the I&B minister, was the guest of honour. "Come and eat with us tomorrow," Neelambai had said over the phone in a cryptic manner. The next day, as Neelambai walked to the venue, the chattering groups of eunuchs fell silent. Dressed in a sleeveless polka-dotted lehnga choli, her long, waist-length hair let loose, her ebony skin glistening, she stood out. Other eunuchs, in silks, chiffons, padded bras, tons of gold, flashy shoes, red lipsticks, glitter nailpolishes and coloured contact lenses faded away into a colourful blur.

Eunuchs are an unpredictable lot—abusive, temperamental, thriving on the shock value they lend to conversations. Neelambai too oscillated between extremes. One moment she was a flirtatious, coy hostess, the next minute a don't-mess-with-me woman of grit. Now she was a bubbly, giggling woman in love with her own coquettishness, the next instant a paan-chewing, invective-spewing shrew.

But Neelambai was revered in her community for being a good patron. "She adopted many children, got girls from poor families married off and would never say no to a needy person," says Anu, a member of her gang. It is a legacy that Sonia and others swear to carry forward. "We return our earnings to the poor," she says. But even as eunuchs make their own rules, defy the law and grab a place for themselves in the murky power circles of the capital, it doesn't escape them that even death can be as bizarre and unnatural as life is. Neelambai's abrupt end only underlines the fact that the price for vulgar amounts of wealth and unequal power is the same for all. Man, woman or eunuch. ■

